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WASHTENAW RAILROADS
Fantasies and Facts

by Louis S. White, Ypsilanti

The golden age of railroad development in the eastern part of our country, covered a period from the early 1830's to about 1900. Reams have been written on the subject; millions have been made and millions lost. Some of these projects were successful, due to actual need and the sterling character of the men behind them, while others were failures, either by intention or lack of character on the part of the promoters.

The stories of the failures lie in musty newspaper files, in court records, and in our county and state histories. Occasionally flamboyant stock certificates will come to light testifying to the skillful persuasive ability of the seller and the gullibility of the purchaser. However, it has always been thus in many lines of endeavor in this land of free enterprise, and we could well be charitable and say that the promoters of the failures in railroad ventures had the best of intentions.

One of the most interesting of these fantasies, at least as it affected Ypsilanti, was the Ypsilanti and Tecumseh Railroad. It was incorporated by State Legislative Act No. 84, of 1838. Note that this makes it a contemporary of the Detroit and St. Joseph R.R. (later the Michigan Central) which started operation to Ypsilanti in the same year.

There is an interesting story concerning this incident. The Ypsilanti and Tecumseh R.R. acquired a depot site at the southwest corner of Adams and Cross Streets. It had been the general talk and belief that the Detroit and St. Joseph would pass through Ypsilanti on the west side of the Huron River and thus form a junction with the proposed Ypsilanti and Tecumseh R.R. Acting on this assumption, a group of citizens, including A. H. Ballard, Marcus Lane, Shubal Conant, DeGarmo Jones, and LeGrand Morse, formed the "Detroit Land Co," and built a huge brick hotel on the site of the present Central High School building. However, as to the busy and profitable junction of the two railroads, the gods willed otherwise. Mr. Mark Norris, a large landowner, miller and merchant of the east side, using his considerable influence, persuaded the builders of the Detroit and St. Joseph to buy his land and build thereon. This turn of events left the Ypsilanti and Tecumseh Railroad and the huge brick "Tecumseh Hotel" high and dry and with no visible means of

support. Some traces of the grading for the roadbed of the Ypsilanti and Tecumseh can still be seen in Pittsfield Township and probably in other spots as well.

In 1871, a "horse railway" was contemplated between Belleville and Denton. It was to be known as "The Belleville and Denton Tributary Tram Railway Co." Judging from the name, tram cars were to be used, probably on rails on a private right-of-way. The capital stock was to be $25,000. Those interested in the venture were T. M. Cody, Wm. H. Marvin, W. E. Warner, J. H. Campbell, Dr. Thornton, S. Y. Denton, G. H. Burroughs, and L. Haskin. $3000 was pledged.

Among other fantasies were:
The Monroe and Ypsilanti R.R., incorporated March 28, 1836.
The Toledo, Ypsilanti and Saginaw Air Line Ry., incorporated Jan. 25, 1870. Termini, the Township of Bedford in Monroe County and the Village of Holly.
Among other proposed railroads intended to serve this area were:
The Monroe and Ann Arbor R.R. Incorporated Mar. 28, 1836. Termini Monroe and Ann Arbor
The Monroe and Ypsilanti R.R. Incorporated same date as above. Possibly the promoters figured that if one didn't succeed, the other would. Capital $400,000. Termini, Monroe and Ypsilanti. The time limit was extended by Act #43 of 1845.
The Canada Southern and Chicago R.R. Articles filed Nov. 28, 1870. Capital $800,000. Termini, the Detroit River and Hillsdale.
The East Saginaw and Ann Arbor R.R. Articles filed Nov. 30, 1869. Capital $2,000,000.
The Toledo, Ann Arbor and Saginaw R.R. Articles filed Aug. 15, 1866. Capital $1,000,000.
The Toledo, Ann Arbor and Northern R.R. Articles filed Nov. 26, 1869

In the vicinity of York Cemetery in York Township, on a north and south road, will be found extensive remains of some proposed railroad. It was apparently headed toward Ypsilanti. The particular thing I noticed was the necessary concrete abutments to carry the track over a small stream. Possibly some of the residents of that vicinity could clear up this matter. Take a ride down there some pleasant summer day and see what can be found out.

The Wabash R.R. This road was completed through the lower edge of Washtenaw County in 1881, passing through Milan, which town lies partly in Monroe and partly in Washtenaw County. The Wabash is a Class 1, double-tracked railroad, but as its influence on the Washtenaw area is not great, its history is not considered here.

The Ann Arbor R.R. The Ann Arbor Railroad Co., or rather its predecessor, the Toledo, Ann Arbor and Northern R.R. Co., was incorporated Nov. 26, 1869. Probably no other railroad passed through so many changes in name and proprietorship as did this road. From 1869 to the present time, when we know it as part of the Wabash system, there have been 18 changes in name. Six of the companies built no actual road. Probably the various aliases were assumed to escape the numerous legal entanglements which embarrassed the grandiose railroad schemes of those days. It was the custom to conduct whirlwind advertising campaigns, sell stock to individuals, towns,

villages, and cities, then squeeze them out and buy up the stock at rock bottom prices.

However, the road was built by stages in somewhat this fashion: From Toledo, 5 miles by 1874; to Ann Arbor, 40 miles by 1878; to South Lyon, 15 miles by 1881; to Cadillac, 176 miles by 1886; and to Frankfort, 72 miles by 1897. The line has now been reduced so that it now comprises about 294 miles.

Not being very familiar with the Ann Arbor R.R., except as I have observed it at Ann Arbor and Milan, I am not in a position to make many comments concerning it. One thing I have noted is that, in the bygone days of steam motive power, its locomotives were huge and its trains long, at least on its through service. Diesel power has now largely supplanted steam, as with most railroads.

I doubt if the Ann Arbor Railroad ever bragged much about its erstwhile passenger service, which has now been abandoned. I recall that my daughter once attended a girls' camp up near Frankfort. The girls made the trip up and back on a so-called passenger train, which stopped almost anywhere and was in no hurry at all. The crew must have had as much fun as did the girls, according to stories related.

The across-Lake-Michigan service, between Frankfort, Michigan, and Manitowoc, Wisconsin, a distance of about 320 miles, is of the greatest importance to the Ann Arbor R.R. It cooperates with and has direct connections with 18 railroads, thus maintaining a short route between eastern trunk-line railroads at Toledo and the northwest Pacific coast area, out of Manitowoc.

The Detroit, Hillsdale and Indiana R.R. This road was opened to Manchester, Oct. 1, 1870, and to Hillsdale, Jan. 23, 1871. It was sold at auction, Dec. 28, 1874, and the name changed to the Detroit, Hillsdale and Southern R.R., Daniel L. Quirk, Pres., and W. F. Parker, Supt., with headquarters at Ypsilanti. The first service provided trains leaving Hillsdale at 4:40 a.m. and 1:25 p.m., and returning at 12:45 and 10:45 p.m.

The Michigan Central R.R. In early Michigan railroad history, the State Legislature settled on a plan providing for three routes across our state. They were known as the northern, central, and southern routes. The northern was to start at Port Huron, the central at Detroit, and the southern at Monroe. All wandered westward, rather nebulously, in the general direction of Lake Michigan and Chicago.

From the intense political wars of the time, three present-day railroads emerged. The northern route became our present Grand Trunk Western Ry.; the central route became what is now known as the Michigan Central District of the New York Central System; and the southern route is now the Monroe Branch of the New York Central (L. S. & M. S. Ry.) The latter railroad has been partially abandoned and has no regular service. Since our interest this evening lies in the central route, we will consider that in more detail, at least in so far as it affects the Washtenaw area.

The ancestor of the Michigan Central was a private corporation, the Detroit and St. Joseph R.R. Co. This company purchased right-Of-way and constructed the road as far as Dearborn early in 1837. In that same year, the State of Mihhigan purchased the chartered rights and all the equipment of the Detroit and St. Joseph. Governor Stephens T. Mason assigned Commissioner David C. McKinstry, of the State Board of Internal Improvements, to make progress in the work on the central route. He at once busied himself in hiring engineers and getting the work underway.

Through the summer, autumn, and even into the early winter of 1837, the parties pushed their work with such great vigor, under the able direction of Commissioner McKinstry, that early completion of the work as far as Ypsilanti was assured. Thus it was that on February 8, 1838, the first passenger train arrived in Ypsilanti. It was an event of more than ordinary importance, and preparation was made to celebrate it with befitting pomp and ceremony. The population was out en masse to witness the arrival of the train. The crude little locomotive, with cord wood piled high on the tender, was followed by the private car, "the Governor Mason," then by three cars of lesser elegance, and three rough cars improvised for the occasion. Aboard the train were Governor Mason himself, many members of the Legislature, the Commissioners of Internal Improvements, numerous prominent citizens, and the Brady Guards of Detroit. The welcome was hearty but boisterous. General John Van Fossen, a prominent citizen of Ypsilanti, delivered to the Governor an engrossed copy of a congratulatory address phrased in the exultant style of the day.

Present at all these "goings-on" was an 8-year old boy, Theodore E. Potter, of Saline, who in later life described the scene as follows: "My father went and took me with him. We found the one street finely decorated with flags and a brass band. We next visited the place where the ox was being roasted over a huge fire. Then we went to the depot to witness the arrival of the first train from Detroit, on which were the officers of the road, with General /Lewis/ Cass and other prominent men. About two inches of snow had fallen and when the train came in sight on the slight up grade near town, it presented the novel spectacle of two men sitting on opposite ends of a cross beam in front of the engine, holding large splint brooms to sweep the snow off the track. That was the first and original snow plow. After the dinner of roast ox, baked potatoes, pumpkin pies and ginger-bread, we all listened to many orations."

On the return trip to Detroit, the engine came to a dead halt at Dearbornville and refused to be of any further service. Horses were procured and without further accident the men reached Detroit, benumbed with cold but burning with glory.

On Oct. 17, 1839, a big parade and celebration in Ann Arbor marked the arrival of the first passenger train there. People came from all around to witness the big event. Mr. James Kingsley of Ann Arbor extended a welcome to the visitors. The line of march for the parade was up Detroit St. to Fourth, then to William, to Main, and north to the public square. Taking part again were the Detroit Brady Guards, the Washtenaw Guards, and the Pittsfield Riflemen. Mr. Thomas Mosely was Marshall of the Day.

The Michigan Central R.R. Co. acquired the Central R.R. from the State of Michigan on Sept. 23, 1846. The price was $2,000,000. The road was completed to Dexter, June 30, 1841; to Albion, June 25, 1844; to Marshall, Aug. 12, 1844; to Battle Creek, Nov. 25, 1845; and to Kalamazoo, Feb. 2, 1846. The construction thus far was done by the State of Michigan. After the purchase by the Michigan Central R.R. Co., the road was completed to Niles in the autumn of 1848; to New Buffalo in the spring of 1849; to Michigan City in the autumn of 1850; and to Chicago in May, 1852. The last stage was interrupted by many legal battles concerning charters. Abraham Lincoln participated in some of these court actions.

Since this is not a history, but merely a dissertation on "Railroads" we will merely add that the Michigan Central has progressed through the years to "double tracking," "automatic block signals," automatic train control, and now to Diesel power supplanting the beloved "iron horse" steam locomotive. An improvement now in service on some parts of the New York Central and to be expected elsewhere is CTC - Centralized Traffic Control. By this system, one man may control the movement of many trains and the necessity of multiple tracks is eliminated.

Electric Railroads. January 9, 1891, the Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti Street Railway Co. began operating what was popularly known as "The Steam Motor Line" between Ypsilanti and the Ann Arbor city limits. At that point passengers were transferred to the cars of the Ann Arbor Electric Street Railway and conveyed into the city. Later in the same month arrangements were completed whereby passengers were carried into Ann Arbor by the Motor Line, thus affording better service.

By Sept., 1892, a track down So. Washington St. in Ypsilanti had been completed so that trains could go to the new station, turn around and come out "head first," instead of backing up Washington St. A new car barn and yard along Harriet St., from Washington to Adams, were also completed.

On Nov. 20, 1896, the electric car made its first trial trip, and burned out a generator. The Steam Motor Line ceased operating and the electric car made its first scheduled trip to Ann Arbor on Thursday, Nov. 26, 1896. The first car on the new electric line from Detroit to Ypsilanti ran to Dearborn, Dec. 24, 1897, the tracks laid to St. Joseph's Retreat. May 19, 1898, electric tracks were laid through the city of Ypsilanti, except on the Congress St. bridge. On Saturday, Sept. 8, 1898, the first trip by electric car , Wayne to Ypsilanti. The small "Ypsi-Ann" car was used. The trip was made about every two hours. Sept. 25, 1898, the first new car went through, olive-green and very roomy. July 12, 1898, the first electric car ran through to Detroit from Ypsilanti. Jan., 1899, the steel for the D,J & C. car barns (now Wrigley's store) on East Congress (now East Michigan) was expected soon. June, 1899, the first car on the Saline Electric Line started operating, only about 5 miles. Sept. 5, 1899, the Ypsilanti and Saline Electric Line formally opened, cars leaving every half hour from 6:15 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. May, 1901, work begun on enlargement of D, J & C. powerhouse. Jan. 18, 1902, the first Detroit to Jackson through car on the D, Y, A.A. & J Ry. passed through Ypsilanti; trip 1 hour, 45 minutes, cars to run every 2 hours.

Aug. 11, 1934, work begun on removing D, J & C tracks on East Michigan in Ypsilanti.

The Underground Railway. [Although not technically "railroad history," this subject is figuratively so closely related that the following description of routes in operation locally between 1840 and 1860, taken from a May, 1885, issue of The Ypsilantian, will be of interest.]

One route entered Michigan in Cass County, the first station being the Quaker Settlement, thence to Cassopolis and Climax, to Battle Creek, where Erastus Hussey had charge.

From Battle Creek it followed the route of the Michigan Central to Marshall, in charge of Jabez S. Fitch; Albion, Edwin M. Johnson, agent; Parma, Townsend E. Gidley; Jackson, Louson Wilcox and Norman Allen; Michigan Center, Abijah Fitch; Francisco, M. Francisco; Dexter, Samuel W. Dexter; Scio, Theodore Foster; Ann Arbor, Guy Beckley and Jacob Volland; Geddes, Richard Glazier.

Thence tp Plymouth and Detroit to Canada. Many however by Ypsilanti, Trenton, and Grosse Isle.

Another route entered from Ohio to Adrian, where Mrs. Laura Haviland had charge; thence to Tecumseh, with R. L. Hall; thence to the Quaker Settlement in Ypsilanti Township; thence to Detroit and Trenton.

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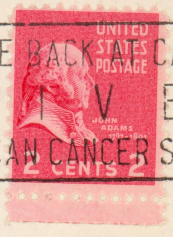
Ypsilanti, Michigan
February 15, 1955

We have to report this month the loss of one old-time member by death: Mr. B(enjamin) Frank(lin) Ohlinger, on Jan. 14, 1955. Mr. Ohlinger was closely tied in with Washtenaw's history and even with one angle of this evening's paper, in that he worked as a young printer's apprentice in the office of The Ypsilantian, the old files of which were consulted by Mr. White for data for his paper. Another tie-in of interest is the fact that Ben (as he was called in those days, not Frank) learned the beginnings of the trade in which he became so expert from The Ypsilantian's editor and part-owner, George C. Smithe, father of Geneva Smithe, your present Washtenaw Impressions editor!

ANN ARBOR, MICH. 1955 2



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